



The SUPPORT Arts and Crafts
International Centre of Thailand
(Public Organization)



Types of Handicrafts

Weaving Jute



Jute or Bulrush is sturdy, highly flexible, glossy, durable, and difficult to break, which is different from other materials when used as wickerwork. As a result, the products made from jute have outstanding features and long usage life. If dyed, the finished products would have more dimensions and more modern look.

Jute is a tall rushlike water plant of the sedge family. It has round light green stem of approximately 1-2 meter tall. The flowers bud at the end of the stem towards the peak. It normally grows in a swamp where there is water all year long. The plant has its origin in Madagascar, Mauritius, Lanka, Sumatra, islands on the Malaysian Peninsula, Indochina Peninsula, Hong Kong, Borneo, and east coast of Australia.

It takes around three years to grow jute to the size that can be used – when its stem is not less than one meter tall. Once pulled out, the new bud will sprout out to replace the old one. There are two types of Jute, big jute (Jute Yai) and small jute (Jute Nhu). The first one can be used more because the latter one is small and short and less sturdy.

Most people in Southern Thailand use jute to make mats, sails, ropes, and agricultural bags. The weaving of jute mat is different from other mats. Jute is first mixed with white clay and dried in the sun before the jute is flattened. If the finished product requires colors, the bulrush is dyed before weaving. Most common product from bulrush is seating mat called “Krajute Mat” (mat made from jute).



Plain weave

Design Characteristics of Jute Basketry

Jute basketry designs can be divided into original and applied designs. The original designs include two interlacing design and three interlacing design. These two designs are considered as master design. When start weaving, should start with these basic designs first in order to obtain the skill. From one design, it can be adapted to double stitch, checked designs and floral designs. Two interlacing design, is often used to make mat because the mat would be more sturdy and beautiful. It is also easy to weave and can be adjusted to other designs such as Look Kaew, Dao Lom Duen, Dao Krajai. These three designs are ancient designs that the southern people help to preserve.

The developed or applied designs include L-shape, checker, arrow, zigzag, saucer, etc. They are made in order to expand the market and distribute income to the people within the community.



Twill weave



Twill weave

Jute basketry which reflect the way of life and local wisdom

Jute or bulrush is a plant with are sturdy and flexible. After adding the local wisdom in the production process by mixing jute with white clay, the bulrush wickerwork becomes stronger and highly valuable in terms of usage and aesthetic. Because bulrush is natural fiber, it is also a good ventilated material. The designs have been adjusted to provide the consumers with more choices.

Jute basketry is a local wisdom that reflects the way of life and the cultural foundation of the Southern residents living near the swamp. These people have succeeded the wisdom of bulrush wickerwork from their ancestors. They see the value of the bulrush which is locally abundant and use it to make everyday use items such as hats or mats. Later the villages adapt bulrush to



do handicrafts, changing from part time job to main profession that have been passed down until today.

Jute mats are considered as the representation of bulrush wickerwork identify. In the old days, people use mats to sit on, lay down, or during religious ceremonies. The everyday items have become products which make income and create profession to the people within the community.

In the three south-most provinces, the Muslim community of Ban Thon, Narathiwat Province, made utensils out of bulrush taken from the nearby swamp. When not farming, they would make container to store rice. Consequently, they have applied the wisdom in making bulrush wickerwork to make rice basket. Another popular product made using bulrush is called “Tumu” which means a container with open lid. The lid and the base are woven with indented corners – either six, eight, or twelve corners. The product shows amazing local wisdom and unparalleled delicacy. Making wickerwork requires high expertise and is a laborious process because the artisans need to carefully select the strands of bulrush that have equal sizes. Failure to do so, will cause one side to be distorted and ugly. This is considered as one of bulrush wickerwork handicrafts of the Muslim community in Narathiwat Province which has unique characteristics, unlike any other places.

Important jute products manufacturing places include Bo Krang, Surat Thani Province, currently Cha-uat District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. Each area would have unique patterns and designs

which are different from other areas, depending on the development, lifestyle, belief, and usage of each community.

Nakhon Si Thammarat province is abundant with bulrushes. Apart from producing for everyday items used within the community, the products are sent to other areas, bringing income into the community. The bulrush products from Cha-uat District feature traditional style. Hats, mats, and gunny bags are among common products. It is a succession of long-standing wisdom in the community. People here also have regard of these products. Therefore, we don’t really see many new forms.

Among the popular products include souvenirs from Thalay Noi, Pattalung province, which are famous for their wide variety of jute products that preserve the charm of local handicrafts that very well reflect the identity of the community. Pattalung is another city which has a lot of swamps and bulrushes. Consequently, many well-known souvenirs including mats, gunny bags, and saucers are produced here.





Designs on Jute Mats according to Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim Lifestyles

The designs on the mat receive influence from nature, e.g. trees, flowers, and animals. The patterns on the mat of Buddhists have been developed from Thai designs, such as Look Kaew, Dok Jan and Kan Tor Dok. Some designs are similar to wickerwork designs of Thai Muslims but called differently. The designs of the mat are not limited. They can copy life-like images, weaving the designs of humans or animals, without any religious restrictions. The places where this type of mats is made are Tak Bai District in Narathiwat, Talay Noi in Pattalung, Ban Sakom in Songkhla, and Cha-uat in Nakhon Si Thammarat.

The weaving designs on the mat are complicated and beautiful, adapted from Thai designs in nature. However, Thai Muslims will not weave the



life-like designs such as humans or animals, due to religious taboo. The designs are mostly symbols which can be developed into many forms and called differently according to local dialect.

Weaving Jute Basket

Jute basketry designs can be divided into original and applied designs. The original designs include two interlacing design and three interlacing design. These two designs are considered as master design. When start weaving, should start with these basic designs first in order to obtain the skill. If over one stake and under one, is called one interlacing; over two stakes and under two is called two interlacing; over three stakes and under three is called three interlacing. It is done continuously like this until bulrush is used up.

From one design, it can be adapted to double stitch, checked designs. In weaving, when you are working around continuously, you will have to have an odd number of stakes to make the pattern come out in the second row as the reverse of the first, as it should. This is done repeatedly until bulrush is used up.

Next, two interlacing design, is often used to make mat because the mat would be more sturdy and beautiful. It is also easy to weave and can be adjusted to other designs such as Look Kaew, Dao Lom Duen, Dao Krajai. Eight strands would be used.

Last, three interlacing designs, nine strands would be used, three over and three under. The interlacing is working in the same way as one interlacing and two interlacing designs.





Methods in Preparing Jute Strands

Collect jute which is 2-3 years old which is neither too young nor too old. The plants are often collected during rainy season because they are at their best and thin enough that they can be easily flattened. The bulrush collected during this season is sturdy, not easily breakable. The plants are plucked out instead of cutting. Five stems are gathered and pulled out together at the same time with force. In local dialect, the action is called “Hak Ko Aiteng” (break the neck of Aiteng, Aiteng being a joker in the leather puppet). Then, the plucked bulrush is bundled together, with approximately 500 stems per bundle. The top and the end are trimmed out. One bundle can produce one piece of mat.

The jute is dipped into white clay (boiled clay water where the clay is taken from the paddy field). In doing, ensure that jute is lightly coated with the clay. After dried, we will get white jute strands which are sturdy, not brittle, and easily broken.

Leave bulrush strands to dry in the sun completely for three days. Place bulrush strand in vertical direction and use hands to expand the base. Or, spread bulrush strands on dried leveled floor to prevent mold.

Store in the godown or basement. Prevent from sun and wind.





Hammer or flatten by rolling mortar on top of the bulrush strands to flatten them. The process takes around 30 minutes. In the past, a mortar is used to pound on the wooden floor until bulrush strands are flattened. At present, some places use ironing machine.

The bulrush strands are then woven into various products.

If required in various colors, the strands are dyed before weaving.

Decorate other parts and finishing in order that the finished products are strong and sturdy. For decoration, other materials might be added e.g. fake leather, zipper.





Development of Jute Products

At present, jute wickerwork has developed in designs and colors. Products that are more closely related to everyday items such as cross-body bags, laptop covers, iPad covers, sandals, house decoration items e.g. plate mats, saucers, chair covers. The items are designed according to the imaginations of the artisans. The jute strands are first dyed so that interesting designs can be achieved when weaving. There are both ancient and modern designs such as Look Kaew, checked, Dao Lom Duen. There is new creation to weave jute and palm leaf together into the designs that the artisan wants. Moreover, jute is combined with other materials to create more new products such as bag straps or bodies. These new innovation can be adjusted according to the imagination of the artisans or entrepreneurs to further develop the products. Jute



strands are dyed so that they can make outstanding look. The artisans would determine which pair of colors to be used. Black-white is popular among new generations. The white color of palm leaf is used with bulrush dyed in black. Other color pairs are also used depending on the preference and invention. In order to make the products more widespread, the new forms and varieties can help create differentiation and more usage of the products.

Some areas use this natural advantage to be the strong point of making environmentally-friendly products - natural wickerwork without the use of lacquer. Applying lacquer may make the products look stiff and not beautiful. When touched, the products would not be flexible and difficult to store. This is why jute products are popular among the foreigners who specially love the wickerwork made from nature. Because bulrush can be made into a wide variety of products, they become much more interested.

Currently, jute products receive well acceptance in foreign countries, especially Japan. In some areas, jute is not coated with lacquer but let its flexibility to be the attractive selling point. The tourists can roll the products and easily put in the travel luggage. When taking out, the products can spread out to their original shapes. This is considered as a remarkable local wisdom



that the ancestors have passed down to the new generations. It is up to them whether how much they can build upon and further develop the products to have more value-added. At present, the products from nature have become increasingly popular. Chemical dyes are changed to natural dyes. Thus, health-concerned consumers and environmental-friendly consumers are especially attracted to these products. Finding new distribution channel is as important as developing new products to support new target group or new market. The people in the community gather in order to work together to achieve these.

It is crucial that each community maintains the identity of the traditional culture of the ancestors and truly understands the materials and usage so that these values still remain when developing the products further. The products are adapted according to time. The unlimited color choices are coupled with the imagination of the new successors to produce the new bulrush wickerwork products.





Cultural and Social Values

In the past, people started weaving bulrush to be used as household items. After the knowledge has been passed down, from making for own usage has turned to be making for sale as extra income. The products have been developed and more and more people have become interested in the products. From an extra income has gradually become main income. Because farming and fishing do not give steady income due to unpredictable weather, people have pushed jute wickerwork to be the main line of income of the family, starting from a household to a community. The people gathered as a group to create career, income, and products that meet the increasing need of the market.

The career group has spread from one community to another, starting from Cha-ua District where jute

grows abundantly. The products are sold to other communities, distributing income and building network. The work is divided among the households from distributing bulrush, weaving, combining, finishing. Work is distributed to each household according to their skills. In doing so, the community is strengthened and the teenagers are encouraged to learn how to weave. It is producing new generation to succeed the legacy and promoting the benefit use of spare time. It can be said that this handicraft have economic, cultural and social values.

Jute basketry is a local wisdom which has been developed further into more valuable products, passing down from generations to generations. The products reflect the unique characteristics and expertise of the artisans who are filled with knowledge and delicacy. They are worthy of preservation to the next generations and should be developed to be widely known and create work and income to the people.



How to Care

The jute products should be kept in dry place. If exposed to humidity, the products will have molds and will not have long lives. However, if can't be avoided, it is recommended to dry the products in sunlight so that they can be used as normal.



References

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